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'It's so much better than contact': A qualitative study exploring children and young people's experiences of a sibling camp in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This article explores children and young people's experiences of a sibling camp based in the United Kingdom. Sibling camps are an intervention based on children's activity holidays that aim to promote meaningful contact for siblings separated in public care. This study adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with 11 children and young people; this included one sibling group of three and four sibling groups of two. The children's ages ranged from 8 to 17 years old, and they had all attended at least one camp with their sibling. Findings highlighted how the children valued the extended time they could spend with their siblings at camp, and how they felt this enabled them to better understand their siblings and improve their relationships. Findings also showed how the children developed close supportive relationships with the staff at the camps, who ensured they were cared for, and they also supported them with managing their relationships, which some participants acknowledged at times could be challenging. The participants also valued spending time with other sibling groups who also experienced separation. The study found camps provided a space for these children to maintain links with their siblings and to strengthen their sibling bonds.

KEYWORDS

care experiences, child welfare, contact, contact (with birth relatives), foster care (family), looked after children

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom (UK), the placement of sibling groups in public care remains a critical practice concern. Most children and young people entering care in the United Kingdom have at least one sibling (Jones & Henderson, 2017). Due to the increasing numbers of children that require placements and the ongoing shortage of foster placements (Fostering Network, 2011), decisions are often made to

separate siblings. To be sure, there are occasions where siblings need to be placed apart in order to ensure safety or that individual needs are met. However, it seems in the U.K. context that separation has become common and arguably a routine practice. This is highlighted in recent U.K. research that found seven out of 10 sibling groups in care live apart (Jones & Henderson, 2017).

In a number of countries, the significance of sibling relationships is also enshrined in legislation. For example, in the United Kingdom,

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Section 23 (7)(b) of the Children Act 1989 refers to the significance of siblings and states that where practical and consistent with the children's welfare, they should be accommodated together. However, in U.K. practice, it is estimated that 49.5% of siblings in public care are separated (Ashley & Roth, 2015). For example, Rushton, Dance, Quinton, and Mayes (2001) found that half of the placements among children in late permanent placements had been made without any plans for sibling contact.

The practice of separating siblings in placement is compounded with limited interventions that promote and support sibling relationships. This paper explores children and young people's perceptions of a sibling camp, which is an intervention that aims to support separated siblings to maintain and build their relationships. The paper begins by briefly introducing key literature on the broader topic of sibling relationships and then discusses the evidence on siblings in public care before focusing on the specific research evidence that examines sibling camp interventions. The study is then presented with sections on methodology, findings, implications for practice and limitations.

2 | SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Mchale, Updegraff, and Whiteman (2012, p. 913) highlight that despite sibling relationships being a 'fixture in the family lives of children and adolescents,' they have received far less research attention than other family relationships. The literature on siblings has also been described as limited in its scope, due to a predominant focus on psychodynamic approaches that often concentrate on sibling rivalries and conflicts (Edwards, Hadfield, Lucey, & Mauthner, 2006). However, there is now a growing body of research that has started to highlight the benefits of having a sibling and the positive impacts that a sibling relationship can have on a person's well-being (Edwards, Hadfield, Lucey, & Mauthner, 2006).

McDowall (2015) argues that for children and young people in public care, a sibling relationship promotes a greater sense of identity. This is particularly important for children from indigenous and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds as it provides them with an understanding of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds and their family histories. Thoburn, Norford, and Rashid (2000) highlights how BAME children in both adoption and fostering placements experience separation from their siblings, and the children they interviewed expressed how difficult it was to grow up apart from their brothers and sisters. Furthermore, others argue that separation is problematic as these shared understandings with a sibling can enable children to develop resilience (Wojciak, McWey, & Waid, 2018) and emotional security (Shlonsky, Bellamy, & Elkins, 2005). Sibling relationships often provide the first opportunities for children to develop social skills such as conflict resolution, cooperation and negotiation (Kramer & Bank, 2005).

The longest lasting human relationships are often between siblings, and they can offer valuable support and comfort during difficult times across the lifecycle (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013). For

example, siblings can come together to support each other at times of loss and bereavement. Avioli (1989) suggests that having a sibling relationship in later life benefits mental health. This is a time when people can be vulnerable to social isolation, and sibling can provide a valuable human connection, which can promote a sense of emotional security (Avioli, 1989).

3 | SIBLINGS IN PUBLIC CARE

As noted above, siblings are frequently placed separately. This separation reduces their ability to support one another. We know from the existing literature that includes the testimonies of people with a care experience that separation from a sibling can be traumatic, and it can impact negatively on a person's well-being. For example, in the earliest studies into family placement, the negative effect of separation is clear, and it permeates the accounts of those on the 'orphan trains' in the United States during the 1800s (Warren, 2004) and also the child 'evacuees' from London in the United Kingdom during World War 2 (Isaacs, 1941). Separation from parents and then siblings, with little to no contact, was traumatic for these children. There are clear recommendations from these early studies, highlighting the need to strengthen sibling bonds through placement together or contact (Isaacs, 1941). In a more recent study, Ashley and Roth (2015, p. 6) quoted a 15-year-old child who experienced sibling separation who said 'When your sibling is taken away from you, it takes away your heart.'

Although there is a growing body of research about the importance of sibling relationships, there is still limited contemporary U.K. research on siblings in public care, particularly which focuses on their relationships and contact experiences (James, Monn, Palinkas, & Leslie, 2008). The available research evidence suggests children in public care typically express a strong desire to stay in contact with brothers and sisters upon separation (Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005), but the reality is that sibling contact too often reduces in frequency and quality over time (Boddy et al., 2013). Only 40–50% of children in care have weekly contact (through visits, phone, email and letters/messages on social networking sites) with a birth family member, which is often their sibling (Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005). This is problematic when one considers Wojciak et al.'s (2013) findings that showed siblings who had greater contact reported more positive sibling relations. They also found that children's perception of the sibling relationship mediated the effect of trauma on internalizing symptoms. Furthermore, Wood and Selwyn (2017) found that sibling relationships can result in looked after children adopting a caring role, which can at times be challenging and help to develop their self-esteem and self-worth.

It is important to acknowledge that there is evidence that suggests placing siblings together does not always lead to improved outcomes for children (Quinton, Rushton, Dance, & Mayes, 1998). Sinclair (2005) highlights that relationships between siblings can involve conflict and tensions. Accordingly, a sibling can have both a

positive and negative effect on their placements (Sinclair, 2005). This is reinforced by Pike and Oliver (2017) who provide evidence that the quality of the sibling relationship has a causal impact on children's behaviour. For example, they found that siblings who played well together also showed this benefitted their social development and relationships with others, and they were more able to show empathy and cooperate during interactions and sharing (Pike & Oliver, 2017).

However, research also shows poorer outcomes for children who have had disrupted sibling relationships and for those who have had minimal or no contact with their siblings while being in care, with findings indicating an increased chance of placement breakdown and a reduced likelihood of placement permanence (Hegar, 2005; Leathers, 2005). Separated siblings in care also show poorer educational outcomes than sibling groups who are placed together (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011). Another study, 'Children who go missing from care,' revealed that one of the main reasons why children run away from foster care or children's homes was to see their siblings (Taylor, Rahilly, & Hunter, 2012).

Although this paper focuses on children in foster care, there is also a need to maintain meaningful sibling relationships for children who are adopted. In the United Kingdom, Sections 26 and 27 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 place a duty on the court to consider contact arrangements for birth families and their children when making a placement order and a duty to consider such arrangements when an adoption order is made is provided under Section 46 (6). The intention for these provisions is for contact arrangements to be agreed by the parties involved. However, the support for postadoption contact is often limited and variable in practice, despite Neil's (2002) findings that social workers, adoptive parents and birth parents have an 'openness of attitudes' to postadoption contact.

Based on this evidence, there is a clear need to address ways to better support the sibling bonds of children in public care. Although increasing placement provision for sibling groups would be key, there is an extremely stretched care system and a shortage of foster carers, which has been an enduring problem. Therefore, interventions are needed to support the large number of young people who are inevitably placed separately from their siblings. Sibling camps are one such intervention.

4 | SIBLING CAMP INTERVENTIONS

Sibling camps follow a traditional American summer camp model, where children spend periods of their school summer holiday at an activity camp with other young people. There are several research studies exploring the benefits of these activity camps for children with learning disabilities and also those with life limiting medical conditions, which have been published in the United States (Brown, 2005; Hunter, Rosnov, Koontz, & Roberts, 2006). However, there is limited research on the Camp to Belong programme that brings together siblings separated by foster care.

Camp to Belong has been running since 1995, and they have currently worked with over 10,000 children and young people. The

camps are multisite across the United States but follow a handbook in order to provide consistency across the different camps. The camps have two key aspects to their programme's activities; the first aspect involves typical youth camp activities, boating and archery; the second aspect provides what they refer to as signature activities that focus on strengthening sibling relationships, building resilience and skills for self-advocacy. The aim is to develop children and young people's positive identity formation. An example of one of these signature activities is pillow making and quilting. During their time at camp, the young people make a pillow or quilt, which includes a personalized message they then share with their sibling.

In the United Kingdom, the Children's Rights Director (2011) undertook a survey exploring children's experience of public care and found 42% of 370 children reported that camps were a good way of keeping in touch with brothers and sisters. Despite sibling camps being around for over 20 years, there is still very limited research exploring their effectiveness. However, recently, Waid and Wojniak (2017) undertook a multisite evaluation, which reported that the young people enjoyed the camps and crucially that their relationships with their sibling improved, and conflicts were lower following their participation at camp. These improvements were reported in interviews by both the young people and their foster carers.

Like many child welfare interventions, the Camp to Belong programmes have been adopted and transferred across different countries. For example, there are now sibling camps in Australia and New Zealand. Despite sibling camps existing in the United Kingdom since 2007, there is limited U.K. research in peer-reviewed journals that explores their effectiveness. A recent study from Parker and McLaven (2018) explored a U.K. approach to sibling contact where separated siblings went on a residential weekend. The intervention provided a space for sibling relationships to be maintained with child-centred adventure activities that the participants enjoyed. Carers and young people were interviewed, and data showed participants were positive about the experience and the way it helped to strengthen sibling bonds. The study provides valuable insights into a sibling camp type intervention in the United Kingdom; however, the authors acknowledge a limitation of the project was that it was based on a new intervention and the data stems from just one residential weekend.

Accordingly, this study builds on the work of Parker and McLaven (2018) by examining a more established sibling camp intervention, which was run by a national charity for over 8 years. The key contribution of this study is that some of the participants had lengthy experience of attending camps. Some of the young people we interviewed had been attending the camps for over 5 years. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the children and young people experienced these sibling camps in the United Kingdom. This is important as childhood scholars argue the need for researchers to include children's voices, when exploring matters that affect their lives (Williams & Rogers, 2014). This is also vital for understanding the effectiveness of sibling camps as it is the children and young people who are at the centre of the intervention.

5 | METHODS

This qualitative study focused on a sibling camp intervention run by a national U.K. charity, which was open to children from across the country. However, the participants in this study were predominantly from London and the South-East, where the Charity's head office was based. The study was undertaken by two researchers: One was totally independent of the organization, and they undertook all the interviews. The other researcher was at the time the head of research and evaluations, for the wider charity, and they were not known to the children; however, the staff team was known to them. Their role in the research was to assist with the consents from the parents and social workers and the thematic analysis and the shared drafting of this article.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 young people who attended the sibling camp programme. The participant's ages ranged from 8 to 17 years old. The sample included one sibling group of three and four sibling groups of two. The sample included four young people who were White British, five who were mixed heritage and two young people with Lebanese heritage. Three of the sibling groups of two had attended two camps; the sibling group of three had attended three camps, and the remaining sibling group of two had been attending for several years and had been to five camps. All the participants had been in foster care for over 12 months and were placed in long-term foster placements.

Prior to starting the fieldwork, the project received ethical approval from the University of Bath. Beyond this approval, the researchers were committed to view ethics as an ongoing process with the aim of causing no harm to participants throughout. To recruit participants, an information sheet was circulated to all the participants from two of the camps, and this was done prior to their start. The information sheets explained the research aims and outlined issues such as consent and confidentiality. The researchers then attended the two camps to speak to the potential participants, to share the aims of the research and answer any questions they had. After the recruitment period, 11 young people expressed an interest in participating.

Interviews were then arranged with the young people; 10 were held at foster care homes, and one (at the request of a young person) was held at a coffee shop. Prior to commencing each of the interviews, consent to participate was discussed with every young person to ensure they understood what they were consenting to, and they were then asked to sign a consent form. Consent was also obtained from the participant's social workers in the local authorities (LA), as the young people were all subject to care orders, meaning the LA shared Parental Responsibility. Consent for the children to participate was obtained from the birth parents, and this was kindly arranged with the support of the social workers.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used. The main areas we covered were the camp experience (best bits of camp and the areas to improve), then we focused on participants experiences and perceptions of the sibling relationships and contact, including discussions about the frequency and quality of their contact before the camp, while at camp and after camp.

The interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed verbatim; pauses and 'ums and errs' have been removed from the quotations used in this paper. Corden and Sainsbury (2006) state that qualitative researchers often do this to enhance readability and so that the details of written verbatim speech is not judged critically, undermining the meaning of the participants contribution. Transcripts were stored securely and organized in NVIVO. At the point of transcription, the data were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used.

A social constructivist epistemology underpins the study we acknowledge that the analysis was socially produced and there was not a focus on analysing the discursive. Data were analysed using a six-stage thematic analysis approach that involved searching across datasets for meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were read line by line, and codes were listed. Initial themes were developed from this list of codes. The themes were then defined and subsequently reviewed until four key themes were constructed.

6 | FINDINGS

The findings section presents data that relates to the key themes: (1) opportunities and special memories; (2) relationships with staff; (3) getting on and building bonds; (4) the benefits of time with others who have a shared experience.

It is important to acknowledge there are calls to move away from using the word contact to something more child centred, like the term family time (TACT, 2019), and the authors would endorse this call. However, in this study, the word contact was used by all the participants, so for consistency across the data and the discussion, we continue to use the term in this paper.

6.1 | Opportunities and special memories

Naseem: for me it was a fun weekend, and you want to have fun, especially with your brother.

Data showed that these participants found the sibling camps to be a fun experience. Often camp also enabled them to take part in activities that they had never done before. The quotation from Dale really encapsulates the excitement the many of the young people conveyed when they talked about the activities and experiences they had at camp.

INT: And what things have you liked about camp?

Dale: Jet skiing, was my favourite

INT: Cannot believe you go jet skiing, that sounds really cool.

Dale: yeah, it's amazing a good opportunity, jet skiing, quad biking, high ropes, um, yeah, we do loads of stuff like that, a lot of stuff. Um, on our last one, we played airoball, which were fun ... yeah, it's like trampolining where you have got a ball, it's

like basketball on the trampoline, you have to shoot in the other person's hoop and then you get points.

INT: Are they activities that you have done before?

Dale: I done high ropes before, but the other stuff was the first time at camp

There was also a sense of pride from some young people that they achieved something in taking part in the activities. This often involved them overcoming nerves or fears, which seemed to have built their confidence and self-esteem.

Steve: I remember at the last camp on the high ropes there was this thing called the leap of faith and my little sister did that she was really brave because I did not want to do it.

INT: What was that like then, was it a climbing thing?

Steve: You climbed up stood on a ledge and then jumped across to grab a rail. I nearly backed out so I was surprised she did it. Everyone encouraged her though and we cheered her on I will always remember her after she was so happy.

As this quotation above shows, the activities not only boosted the confidence of some of the participants for others, it also provided important memories. In Steve's words, he will always remember his sister after she made the 'leap of faith,' and in a context where he is separated and growing up apart from his younger sister, this fond recollection suggests the camp activities provided special memories for Steve to cherish. These memories are also documented by the staff with photographs and every child gets given a photo album after the camp.

6.2 | Relationships with staff

Sam: I got along with staff from the start ... they were really supportive, they were nice to me. I can remember my first camp spending most of my time playing cards with staff.

This quotation from Sam highlights how he felt the staff team was caring and supportive, which was a view shared by several participants. The participants suggested staff were skilled in settling people into the camp and making people feel welcomed and safe. The staff team came from backgrounds in education and youth work, and their skills in direct work with children were valued by the participants. The staff team were also very consistent, with the same core group working at the camps since its inception in 2009; this consistency was recognized by the participants. The relationships with the staff group also seemed to extend beyond camp with the staff being contacted at the charities office to offer support. Kerry provided the following example of how she did that.

Kerry: Once I was feeling really upset at my foster carers and I talked to one of the staff, you know, because I had the number, so I just called them up in the office, and they listened, they try and help.

INT: You called the staff from camp.

Kerry: Yeah.

INT: Do you ever call your social workers in that sort of situation?

Kerry: Not really to be honest, 'cos I do not know my social worker that well. I mean with camp, you get to spend a whole week with people there and they do look after you. You probably spend more time with people at camp in one week than you would with a social worker in years.

The following quotation shows how the consistent staff team was recognized by the participants as skilled in responding calmly to children and young people. They also presented in the data as being instrumental in supporting the relationships between siblings, which at times as with any sibling group could be challenging.

INT: Is it the same people you see, same staff every time?

Billie: Yeah mostly, some of them just like some I have not seen them sometimes, just pop by on certain camps, but normally it's just Sarah, you know Gary, Diane the normal ones ... They are the ones that come to like every camp.

INT: And you think they do a good job of it.

Billie: Yeah, definitely, they are amazing coming into every camp, dealing with kids for some time. Twenty-four hours a day, if I was an adult I could not do that.

INT: No, why not?

Billie: I would just have ... I would just rage out at one point. Especially when we are all 'hangry' and arguing with each other! They are all calm and happy, I do not know how they do that!

6.3 | Getting on and building bonds

Gary: We argued a lot, but after that because we had that time to argue we got to know each other better and that's why we know how to sort our situations out now.

Rivalries and conflicts are well documented in the literature relating to siblings (Edwards, Hadfield, Lucey, & Mauthner, 2006; Sinclair, 2005), and although the participants in this study were overwhelmingly positive about the camps, and the quality time it afforded them with their siblings, they did present how at times this involved its challenges. One of the participants Katie described how having a sibling 'wasn't always happy families.' This view was also shared by Laura who explained how camp helped with this.

Laura: The thing is we do not always get on, we can both be stubborn and argue.

INT: Does coming to camp kind of help with any of that though, spending time with your siblings?

Laura: Yeah.

INT: In what way is it helpful?

Laura: Just helps like, feels like more, I cannot explain it, it helps, well obviously we know each other really well, but like it just helps us to kind of build on our like relationships. Yeah, and sort of get closer

The excerpt from the transcript below highlights how camp enabled Naseem and his brother to spend time together, which he felt enabled them to learn more about each other, have fun and get along.

Naseem: Today me and my brother we get along very well and camp was a big part of that ... it is important especially when siblings are separated they do not get to see each other a lot, but when you put them in the same bedroom for a whole week that's when they get to know each other more, and when you do activities ... you get relaxed after a while. But it wasn't until after going to the second camp that's when I got used to it, me and my brother we were mature then and we got along better, and yeah so the second camp in terms of getting on with my brother was better... I did get to know my brother more.

INT: Could you tell us more about that? What sort of things did you learn about him?

Naseem: It's just about getting along. I think I got along more with my brother. I mean he's your brother and you are supposed to get along with him and so it happens naturally after a while when you get used to each other. That's how it felt, it felt natural it did not feel like we were on a mission, trying to sort problems out. We just got along and started to have fun.

The following excerpt from Gary's interview shows how for some participants the camps seemed to strike an important balance between supervision and support from the staff with the space for the siblings to exercise their agency, share their feelings and thoughts with each other and strengthen their sibling bonds.

Gary: Supervised contact is pretty nice but when you get to spend 5 days in an unsupervised environment, that is pretty freeing, it's open minded ... You get to sort of feel free. It's sort of like when we were originally at home. It's not like contact like nothings stopping us like social worker, no laws, and no supervisor. It was sort of just us two and that second time at camp we really bonded together ... For us we sort of felt like we could tell each other a lot of stuff about each other and what went on in the family ... It took a lot off each other's

shoulders. So, we got to sort our problems ... it did feel very nice.

Gary also valued the ability to spend time in the same bedroom together with his sibling, and this was felt to be a positive by other participants. Simon stated this was the thing he liked the most and what made the camps so much better than contact.

INT: What did you like most?

Simon: Actually, sort of sleep in the same room and staying overnight for that long period. ... I like that part, it's so much better than contact. I did see him on contacts but that was the first time in about 4 years that I actually got to stay with him for more than 3 hours ... so yeah especially we get to sleep in the same room.

When Katie was asked if she sees her sister outside of camp, she described how she did not always get on with her sister; they were close in age, but she explained they 'didn't always see eye to eye.' However, the excerpt below shows that despite not getting along with her sibling and mixed feelings as to whether they would build on their relationship and see each other more, she still valued the time they could share at the camps each year.

Katie: I think it is the sibling's choice to carry on having more contact with each other after the camp. That's what I think... Do we get along? Do I want to see her more? Or maybe we do not get along at all and it is better if we stay apart. I think the camp gives us that choice because it lets us know each other more and with that It gets some weight off of your shoulders because when you do not see your sister a lot, or at all even, then once you have seen them it's better, you do not feel guilty and feel like you have at least accomplished something, even if it was bad or good you have actually spent some time with them.

6.4 | The benefits of time with others who have a shared experience

Findings so far highlight how the camps had achieved what they were aiming to do; the data show they provided a safe supportive space for siblings to come together, have fun and build their bonds. However, data also revealed that camps provided another positive experience that the young people also valued and that was the ability to meet with others who had the same experience.

INT: You know you said before you do not necessarily talk about your siblings to people at school, what are you like with people here? Would you be comfortable with the other young people here knowing about that sort of stuff?

Jude: Yeah, because they know like what it's like to not live with their siblings, cos they do not live with all their siblings, so that they like understand what you are going through ... So that way you can trust everyone.

Other participants felt that they could trust others who attended the camps, which, in turn, led to close friendships. The excerpt below from Katie's interview demonstrates how this served as form of social capital for her.

INT: Do you talk to your friends at school about your siblings? Do they know you do not live with them?

Katie: Yeah, most do. My best friends know that I live with my brother right now, they know that my sister lives away and stuff like that, but they do not know the in's and out's because I just, I am not hiding anything but just ... They do not need to know sort of thing.

INT: So, when you come to like the siblings camp is that any different, do you ever talk about it in more detail with them?

Katie: Yeah, 'cos, do you know Sal and Karen?, well in our room in at the last camp we just all like explained our situations ... we are in similar situations, so it's more easy to express it with them ... their situation is their mum was a bit of a alcohol addict at one point ... and their dad, I think he was abusive or something, towards their Mum, that's what I think, but I'm not quite sure, I forgot.

INT: And you know when you talked about it with them was there any staff there?

Katie: No, just us ... we just had a chat., it was kind of good just to like know why you are here, to talk, yeah it was good.

INT: Did that sort of affect the relationship you have with them afterwards?

Katie: Made it stronger. 'cos if you can tell someone that, you can really trust them. I am really close with Sal

INT: And do you stay in touch with Sal outside the camp? (Katie nods) How do you do that?

Katie: Yea, social media, because they live up in another town, so obviously I cannot just go and meet up with them, I wish I could but I just text them and Instagram ... Yeah and then hopefully see them at the next camp.

things that they had not tried before. Participation in these activities was sometimes challenging; they required some bravery, and this seemed to boost the young people's confidence. Importantly, the activities themselves often provided special memories for the participants, as they served as significant events with their separated sibling. These experiences could be understood to strengthen sibling bonds and increase the quality of the relationship, which is important as previous studies have found that children's perception of their sibling relationship impacts their well-being and specifically mediated the effect of trauma on internalizing symptoms (Wojciak et al., 2013).

The relationships that the young people formed at the camps also served as a form of social capital, whereby their social network served as a resource they could draw on for support (Rogers, 2018). The participants were clearly fond of the consistent staff group that ran the camps; most spoke of how caring they were while at camp and how they helped in their relationships with their siblings. Others also spoke of how they drew on their support outside of camp, calling the office when they needed some advice and support. The young people also developed their social capital through the connections they made with their peers. Participants described close trusting relationships with others that had been through the same experience as them. They were able to see others who were living apart from their siblings and spend time talking with them and learning about their experiences. This is an important finding when you consider previous research that has highlighted the benefits of peer support for young people in care, particularly in relation to the stigma they often have to manage as a result of being 'in-care' (Rogers, 2017).

This study contributes to the existing literature that highlights the benefit of sibling camps (Waid & Wojniak, 2017; Parker & Mclaven, 2018). Furthermore, these findings also have the potential to have wider impact on social work practice, particularly around sibling contact. This is particularly important when you consider some of the participants in this study described the camps as being so much better than contact. Therefore, it could be beneficial to consider ways to apply lessons about what works at the camps, in day-to-day practice when arranging and supporting contact. For example, the participants highlight that the camps included fun activities that provided young people with special memories of time with their sibling. Of course, it would be a challenge for practitioners to arrange jet skiing sessions for every contact! However, it raises the question as to whether contact could be more child-centred, fun and meaningful with the aim of providing separated children with special childhood memories of times they spent with their sibling. Overnight stays were also an aspect of the camps that the young people valued; one of the participants described how this meant time with their sibling at camp was 'natural.' Accordingly, it might be beneficial for practitioners to reflect on ways to promote contact arrangements that were more 'natural,' perhaps minimizing settings like local authority premises and children's centres, to venues where it is more 'natural' for children to meet. Furthermore, the participants' views suggest that it could also be beneficial when arranging contact, to wherever possible provide siblings with the opportunity to spend extended periods of time together and that affords them the opportunities for a sleepover.

7 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Findings show that overall, the young people who participated in this study were very positive about their experiences on the sibling camps. The camps provided a space for participants to spend quality extended time with their sibling; This is important because for children in public care, sibling contact outside of camps often reduces in frequency and quality over time (Boddy et al., 2013). The data provide some clear messages from their experiences about what they valued with the camps. Firstly, the activities were fun, and they were often

Developing meaningful contact is important when you consider literature cited earlier that highlights the benefits that a quality sibling relationship (Pike & Oliver, 2017), which can support a child's ability to develop their resilience (Wojciak et al., 2018) and emotional security (Shlonsky, Bellamy, & Elkins, 2005).

Data also revealed that the young people also valued the relationships they were making at camp. They valued the consistent supportive relationships with staff who seemed to act as mentors in and out of camp. This highlights the importance of relationship-based practice, which at camps seemed to provide a blueprint on which the young people could model their interactions with staff in their own relationships, with their peers in care, and also with their siblings, which could serve to strengthen their bonds. This finding suggests that outside the camp setting, it could also be beneficial for separated siblings to have access to mentors who could support and promote their relationships.

8 | REFLECTIONS

The participants in the study were all active, and regular attendees at the camps and many had attended a number over the years. As a result, the sample could be understood as being positively skewed, and this might account for the overwhelmingly positive responses about the camps across the sample. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future studies to engage young people that were not regular attendees to explore their experiences and ascertain why they no longer attend. Nevertheless, despite this limitation, data do reveal how these participants experienced the camps and what they really valued about them. Although the interview schedule was designed to elicit negative as well as positive experiences of camp, participants were consistently positive. On reflection, we suggest that this may be due partially to the loyalty they felt towards the staff team, many of whom had been supporting the camps since their inception. Despite these limitations, these children and young people's voices show that sibling camps can be valued highly by those that attend them. Findings also have insights and lessons for policy actors and practitioners who are concerned with ways to best support meaningful contact that promotes quality sibling relationships for children separated in public care.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Dr. Ali was the Head of Research and Evaluation at the charity that ran the camps she is no longer in their employment. The authors report no other declaration of interests.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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